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DE RUEHNE #1641/01 0951337  
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FM AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 4577  
INFO RUEHAH/AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT 0824  
RUEHTA/AMEMBASSY ASTANA 0937  
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 5890  
RUEHEK/AMEMBASSY BISHKEK 0869  
RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 9443  
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 9571  
RUEHDBU/AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE 0667  
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 2793  
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RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 0141  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 3287  
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RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 9793  
RUEHKP/AMCONSUL KARACHI 7346  
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA 9424  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NEW DELHI 001641

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/05/2017

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [BG](#) [IN](#)

SUBJECT: BANGLADESH LEADER TELLS BOUCHER CREDIBLE ELECTIONS  
ARE THE PRIMARY GOAL

Classified By: PolCouns Ted Osius for Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Chief Advisor Fakhruddin Ahmed of Bangladesh told Assistant Secretary Richard Boucher April 5 that free, fair and credible elections were the primary goal of the caretaker government. In a meeting following the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation Summit in New Delhi, Ahmed outlined reforms the newly reconstructed Election Commission had been tasked with, including registration of political parties and addressing monetary corruption and the misuse of authority. The Commission was working on photo identification of voters and transparent ballot boxes as a means to a more transparent election process. Ahmed said it was not possible to give a definite timeline for elections, but that the government would be transparent in its progress toward elections, and would state publicly how much time would be required for each step in the process to be completed. Ahmed appreciated Boucher's offer of continued support in the areas of election reform, anti-corruption and counterterrorism. END SUMMARY.

Free, Fair and Credible Elections Are the Primary Goal

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¶2. (C) Chief Advisor Fakhruddin Ahmed of Bangladesh reassured Assistant Secretary Boucher in a meeting April 5 that free, fair and credible elections were the government's primary goal, and would remain a major focus of the caretaker government. Economic reform was also important for Bangladesh and could not be ignored, warned Ahmed, emphasizing that Bangladesh's economy "could not wait." He also noted that holding elections was not alone sufficient

for good, democratic governance, but that elections held in a manner which reflected the people's wishes, and which included a diverse selection of candidates, were signs of a healthy democracy.

#### Election Commission Reforms - Stopping the Cycle of Corruption -----

¶3. (C) Turning to election reforms, Ahmed stated that the government had reconstructed the Election Commission, and that it was now recognized as a good commission with members who could deliver a good election. Reform issues that the Commission would work on included the registration of political parties, which was not currently required. Once parties were registered, they should follow good governance practices, including auditing and accounting of their finances, asserted Ahmed. The parties would also need to practice democracy within their ranks and follow their own constitutions, Ahmed added. Secondly, undue influence of money obtained through corrupt means, and the misuse of authority needed to be addressed by the Commission. These problems had led to a cycle of corruption in Bangladesh, had unfairly impacted the outcome of elections in the past, and had "eaten away at democratic principles," remarked Ahmed. Candidates should be asked in the future to submit their assets and income before being allowed to contest, suggested Ahmed. On election day itself, the Commission needed to focus on minimizing fraud and reducing the misuse of authority. Political parties, as well as others, had suggested photo identification of voters, and the Commission was looking into this, said Ahmed. Boucher raised the issue of transparent ballot boxes as a means to a fair election,

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and Ahmed responded that he agreed. Photo identification, transparent ballot boxes and other reforms would lead to less manipulation and a more transparent election process, Ahmed assessed, underlining that reforms needed to be in place before new candidates would feel encouraged to move forward and feel that the playing field was level.

Timeframe: No Dates, Just Time Estimates  
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¶4. (C) Pressed by Boucher to lay out a plan for elections and provide dates, Ahmed maintained that it was not possible to give a definite timeline for elections, because many activities are being undertaken in parallel, but rather the government could state when each step of the election process had been started, and provide an estimate of how many months it would take to complete each one. He reiterated that the activities of the Election Commission would be transparent, and that the media and civil society would be free to analyze the progress of the Commission, observing that Bangladeshis would "not let us go, but will be loud and clear," in their desire for reforms to take place. Boucher pointed out that it was important to give the people a sense of commitment and a sense of steady progress toward elections. Ahmed reiterated that democracy was not only defined by holding regular elections and by changing the government "every five years," noting that if elections had taken place in January 2007 as planned, no one would be happy with the results. "We will do everything transparently," affirmed Ahmed.

Appreciation for U.S. Support  
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¶5. (C) Boucher offered continued support for election reform, anti-corruption efforts, and counterterrorism strategies. Ahmed replied that the Government of Bangladesh was particularly happy to cooperate on counterterrorism and thanked Boucher for his offers of support.

¶6. (U) Assistant Secretary Boucher has cleared this message.  
MULFORD